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TO YOUR HEALTH

SUDDENLY GOVERNMENT WANTS YOUR OPINION

WHAT'S KEEPING Americans up at night?

Is it terrorism? Illegal aliens? The economy?

Nope. It's health care.

According to a new Gallup poll released this week, "the availability and affordability of health care" was the No. 1 troubling issue for Americans, with 68 percent saying they worried about this a "great deal." Social Security came in second at 51 percent. A terrorist attack on these shores greatly bothered only 45 percent.

As the United States gets older and health-care benefits get more costly, it's not surprising that the Gallup poll got the results it did. What's surprising is how little play the issue has gotten this political season, with both parties focusing on immigration, terrorism or Washington's climate of corruption as debating points.

Since politicians say they never listen to the polls, how can people turn their grumbling into action? There actually is a way.

Congress and President Bush have created what the politicians are calling the Citizens' Health Care Working Group, a national effort to collect and listen to the opinions of Americans on health-care issues and then make recommendations.

Either through public meetings - including one in Philadelphia in April - or through a Web site (www.citizenshealthcare.gov), the Working Group is asking people these four questions:

- What health-care benefits and services should be provided? How does the American public want health care delivered? How should health-care coverage be financed? And what trade-offs are the American public willing to make in either benefits or financing to ensure access to affordable, high-quality health-care coverage and services?

Policy wonks from all political and health-field persuasions already have weighed in on these questions. What's missing are common folks, the ones who actually have to live with the consequences of Washington's health-care decisions.

Here's a chance to be heard. The Working Group is coming to Philadelphia on April 10 from 4 to 8 p.m. at the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, 19 S. 22nd St. To pre-register for the four-hour event, people can call the city's Health Department at 215-685-5698.

Volunteer to go. Tell them how you can't sleep at night.